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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001182

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/PB AND SCA/FO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [KDET](#) [PTER](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: SHEIKH HASINA COMMITTED TO ELECTIONS ON DECEMBER
18, BUT WORRIED ABOUT EXTREMIST THREATS

REF: DHAKA 1158

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY
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1. (C) Awami League President Sheikh Hasina insists Bangladesh's parliamentary elections must take place on December 18, with or without the BNP's participation. For Hasina, violent extremist groups represent the greatest threat to the restoration of democracy; she fears terrorist attacks within the next month. The Awami League's slate of candidates will include more young leaders, women, and retired army officers. Energy sector and infrastructure development top the list of Hasina's post-election priorities. A month from elections, the prospects for an Awami League victory look good, as do the opportunities for closer U.S.-Bangladesh cooperation in promoting democracy, development, and denial of space to terrorists.

Elections on December 18: With or Without BNP
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2. (C) Following up on the Ambassador's meeting a day following Sheikh Hasina's return to Bangladesh (reftel), P/E Counselor held a one hour one-on-one meeting with the Awami League President November 16 at her residence in Dhanmondi. Hasina's Private Secretary Dr. Hasan Mahmud arranged the meeting, which took place outside the glare of the television cameras. A relaxed Hasina expressed her deep appreciation for the USG's consistent support for elections and the restoration of democracy. Hasina was adamant that elections had to take place on December 18 as scheduled. She implored the USG to continue to press for elections on the 18th. Hasina said she looked forward to meeting with the visiting National Democratic Institute Pre-Election Assessment Mission which was visiting Bangladesh November 15) 20.

3. (C) As she told the Ambassador, Hasina repeated her belief that it was in the BNP's own interest to participate in elections. Hasina was confident that there would be a large voter turnout even if the BNP boycotted. She predicted that many potential BNP and Jamaat Islami candidates would defy a boycott call and stand for election. Hasina confided that some BNP candidates had even approached her asking to join the Awami League. Hasina said she was willing to meet with Begum Zia, but only after the latter had committed to participate in the elections. Without such a commitment she did not see any point to such a meeting, particularly since many of her supporters would oppose such a parlay.

New Look Awami League Prepares for Elections =====

14. (C) Hasina said she had focused on the acceptability of candidates at the local level when screening lists of potential nominees. Hasina complained that some prospective candidates had been absent from their constituencies even while their party workers had been suffering during five years of BNP rule. She had decided to nominate those who had local support and could win. Hasina said she also wanted to bring more ex-army personnel into the party. Hasina explained the party had almost finalized its nominations and commented that before ending her day she needed to sign 300 letters to the prospective candidates.

15. (C) Hasina said she had told the Jatiya Party to be prepared to contest elections independently if the BNP did not run. Even if the JP ran on its own, Hasina would be willing to offer the party seats in the next cabinet. Hasina acknowledged that former President Ershad desperately wanted to be President again. However, she could not promise this since it would be up to the Parliament to elect the next President. (Comment: Since the Parliament functions largely as an extension of the Prime Minister's will, this answer is a disingenuous. End Comment)

Bad Blood with BNP Remains =====

16. (C) Hasina dismissed the BNP's complaints that it had suffered more during the State of Emergency than had the Awami League. For example, Hasina said that Begum Zia had received preferential treatment while in prison. Zia was allowed a maid, while Hasina could not even see a doctor.

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Hasina noted that all parties had agreed to take part in the 1986 elections. At the last minute, Begum Zia pulled out of those elections after giving an inflammatory speech calling on the army to rise up. Zia then disappeared for three days amid rumors she had been taken into custody. According to Hasina, this was all an elaborate charade. Hasina believed some in the military must have encouraged Zia to boycott the 1986 polls. Hasina thought history might be repeating itself, with Zia trying to encourage a segment within the army to intervene on her behalf. Hasina believed Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed wanted elections, but she worried about dissent within the ranks.

17. (C) Hasina also alleged that Zia had some "technical problems" that were preventing her from registering as a voter, now a prerequisite for running for office. First, Zia would be required to prove her date of birth. This would reveal that Zia was not born on August 15 (also the anniversary of Hasina's father's assassination). Second, Zia would need to produce proof of her educational accomplishments. Hasina claimed Zia's official biography exaggerated her educational level.

Concern about Violent Extremist Threats =====

18. (C) Hasina said she had been informed of the Rapid Action Battalion's arrest earlier that day of an alleged JMB member caught in possession of 75kg of explosives (septel). Hasina claimed that her security personnel had warned her that she was on a militant "hit list" along with Khaleda Zia and General Moeen Uddin Ahmed. Pointing to the ceiling, Hasina said she had told her people that only God could protect her. Hasina predicted that violent extremists would try to cause problems in the run up to the elections, including by launching attacks within India that would be blamed on Bangladesh. Hasina said she had told her son Sajeeb not to return to Bangladesh during the election campaign because of threats against his safety. Hasina emphasized her desire to

work with the U.S. to fight terrorism.

¶9. (C) Hasina complained about the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence's role in politics, noting that this had not been the case during her government. Hasina alleged that during the BNP administration the security services had turned a blind eye to the activities of the militant groups. Finally, they had to react after the situation had gotten out of control. Hasina had plans to professionalize the police, improve their pay, and separate the investigation and patrol functions. She wanted the intelligence services to go back to focusing on external and transnational threats. She repeated her concerns about former DGFI Counter Terrorism Director Amin's role in spawning the Islamic Democratic Party as an offshoot of Foreign Terrorist Organization HUJI-B.

Energy and Infrastructure Priorities =====

¶10. (C) Hasina said she understood the next government would face high expectations and would need to immediately take steps to address urgent economic and social problems. She highlighted the need to develop energy resources and infrastructure, including ports, river transportation, and rail development. Hasina also argued in favor of greater integration with India and Nepal, including through energy sharing and transit links. She wanted to make all education free and was looking at improving food security to help address the needs of the most vulnerable. Hasina said that AL teams were working on all these issues.

Comment =====

¶11. (C) During the meeting, Hasina noted that this might be her last election. While she may want to promote new leaders in order to begin building a legacy, she has also been rewarding loyalty in the selection of candidates. Hasina's concerns about her personal security and the broader threat of terrorist attack are understandable--and may be justified.

She remains vulnerable despite the protection provided by the Special Security Force. Our interactions with Hasina since her release from prison in June have been uniformly positive and appear to reflect her desire to forge strong relations with the U.S. prior to her expected return to power. Thus far, Hasina has been saying all the right things.

Moriarty